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C O N F I D E N T I A L TOKYO 001841

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [CH](#) [JA](#)

SUBJECT: JAPAN: GOVERNMENT SIDESTEPPING YASUKUNI VISITS

REF: A. AUGUST 11 2009 DAR

[1](#)B. TOKYO 958

Classified By: CDA James P. Zumwalt for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Prime Minister Aso and most of his Cabinet are signaling their decision to forgo August 15 visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine. In keeping with his longtime opposition to ministerial Shrine visits, Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) President Yukio Hatoyama also said that he would not visit if his party assumes power after the August 30 Lower House election. Both party leaders' clear statements rejecting visits to the Shrine suggest that they want to avoid highlighting an issue that has had minimal resonance with election voters in the past anyway and that has sparked tensions with Japan's neighbors. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) Prime Minister Aso and most of his Cabinet have indicated their decision to forgo August 15 visits to the controversial Yasukuni Shrine--the place of enshrinement for Japan's war dead, including 14 Class-A war criminals, and a persistent point of contention between Japan and Asian neighbors. PM Aso's public comments suggest that he wants to avoid criticism from China and South Korea, and prevent the matter from turning into a campaign issue before the August 30 election. Aso told reporters August 10 that he thought it was "wrong to make people who sacrificed their precious lives for the state a political or election issue or fodder for newspapers." (Ref A.) Then Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in 2006 was the last sitting prime minister to visit Yasukuni on the August 15 anniversary of the end of World War II.

[1](#)3. (C) Most other Cabinet ministers appear to be following suit. Fifteen of the seventeen members of Aso's Cabinet say that they will not visit the Shrine on the anniversary date, according to Japanese press reports. Health, Labor, and Welfare Minister and popular LDP Diet Representative Yoichi Masuzoe and State Minister Yuko Obuchi are some of the members who have publicly stated their intention not to visit Yasukuni. Consumer Affairs Minister Seiko Noda is the only Cabinet member to announce definitively her intention to pay homage at the Shrine. However, she will do so in a "private capacity," according to Japanese media reports.

[1](#)4. (C) In keeping with his longtime opposition to ministerial Shrine visits, DPJ President Yukio Hatoyama said that he would not visit if his party assumes power after the elections, during an August 11 press conference at party

headquarters. "I have no intention to visit," he clearly stated. Hatoyama also underscored his preference for all cabinet members to forgo such behavior.

15. (C) Embassy contacts broadly agree that Aso, although embattled domestically, has helped his own cause on China and South Korea policy, in part, by maintaining an ambiguous position on prime ministerial visits to the Shrine, in contrast with Koizumi, who annually acted on his campaign promise to visit Yasukuni. Aso has told reporters that it is "natural to take into account various situations" when deciding to visit--a reference to Japanese regional relations. (Ref B.) Aso has visited Yasukuni in the past, including as Internal Affairs and Communications Minister during 2003-05, but regional neighbors appear willing to tolerate Aso's past actions. His reported offering during last year's Shrine Autumn Festival and his offering of a potted plant during this year's Shrine Spring Festival only prompted relatively mild expressions of concern from China and South Korea.

16. (C) Aso's and Hatoyama's clear statements rejecting visits to the Shrine on the August 15 anniversary suggest that they want to avoid calling attention to an issue that has had minimal resonance with voters in the past anyway and that has sparked tensions with Japan's neighbors. With his conservative credentials already intact and his party projected to incur major losses during the election, Aso is probably looking to play it safe.

ZUMWALT